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THE  
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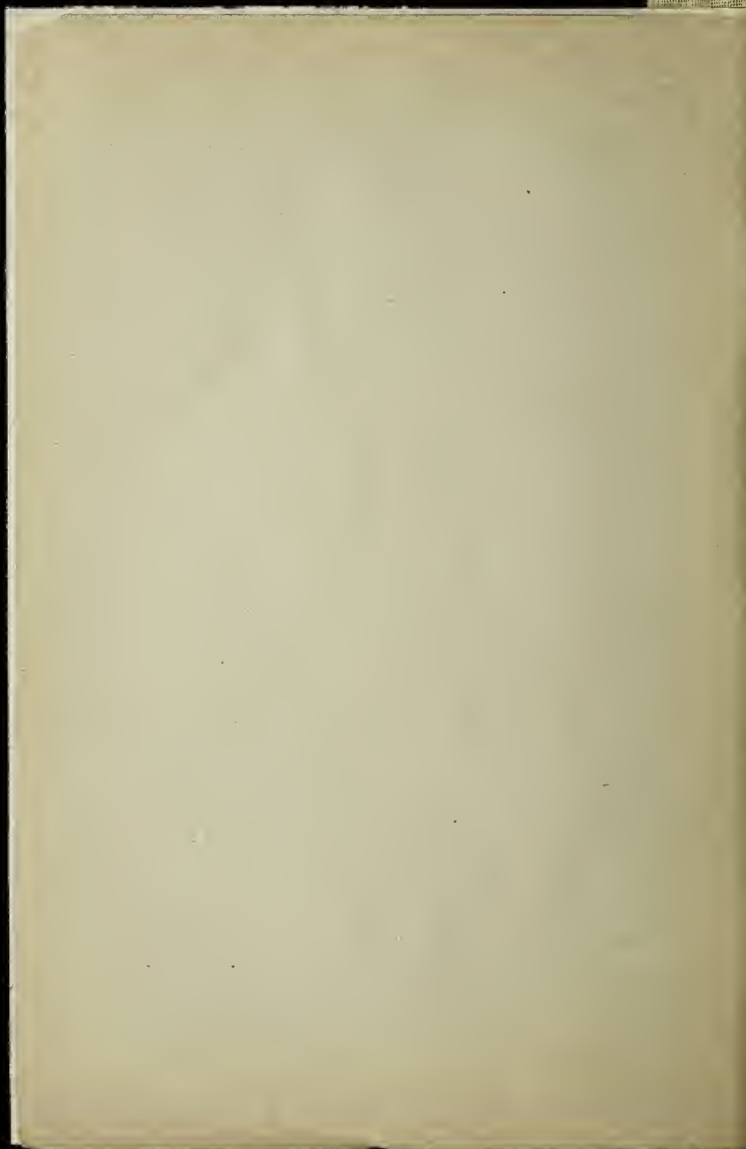
A PAPER:

By Rev. Henry H. Ewert.

(Translated from the German.)

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BERNE, INDIANA,  
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**What Advantages has the Confession  
of Faith of our Mennonite De-  
nomination and what is its  
Mission in our Day?**

The Christian church of to-day does not present an organic whole, but is separated into many denominations which hold more or less aloof from one another, each asserting that it represents most nearly the true idea of Christianity. Such a belief need not be looked upon as bigotry. On the contrary, it would indicate a lack of honest conviction, if a person would say, another denomination were just as much in the right as his own, while the two differed in important matters of faith. How could, for instance, a person who believes that Jesus Christ is the only mediator, at the same time

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say, that it is just as right to call upon the mother of Jesus and the saints for mediation? How could a person who believes that war is wrong, at the same time say, that those who defend warfare are in the right too? As long as a denomination exists, it must believe, that, taking all in all, no other denomination is as nearly right as itself; otherwise it would have to feel it as its duty to give up its separate existence, and join those denominations, whose creed it finds just as correct as its own. We, as a Mennonite denomination believe, that we still have a right to exist; so it is necessary that now and then we examine the grounds upon which we claim this right. And the question at the head of this paper intends to make us enter upon such investigation.

The investigation of this ques-



tion puts us to the necessity of comparing our confession of faith with those of other denominations. This need not and must not be done in a dogmatic and overbearing spirit; but with an humble truth-seeking mind.— While making such a comparison we at once notice, that our confession of faith emphasizes important doctrines which are overlooked or denied by other denominations. This refers to the doctrine of baptism on the confession of faith, of church discipline, of taking of oaths, and of non-resistance.

But the difference between us and other denominations must be sought deeper than in the doctrines referred to. These distinguishing doctrines, when we do not consider their foundation in Scripture, may all be traced back to OUR CONCEPTION OF THE CHURCH OF GOD, a conception

in which we differ fundamentally from all older denominations, particularly in the view we take of the relations of the church to the world. Our principle is: "Separation of church and world!" That of other churches, the Catholic as well as the Protestant, to a certain extent: "Union of church and world." Be it, as is particularly the case with the Catholics: "a taking in of the world to control it;" or, as is more the case with the Protestants: "a taking in of the world to permeate it." This difference is most manifest in the conception of the relation between church and state. Constantine the Great had made the church a STATE church; and this unnatural union of church and state, was taken by the reformers into their system as a matter of course. The worldly author-

ity with its strong arm was to further the interests of the church, and the endeavor of the reformers was to found state churches. THE MENNONITE DENOMINATION WAS THE FIRST AND FOR A LONG TIME THE ONLY CHURCH DENOMINATION WHICH DESIRED TO MAINTAIN ITS EXISTENCE INDEPENDENTLY OF THE STATE. The same difference manifests itself in the conception of the relation between church and nation; that is, between a church-body and a body-politic. The first named denominations are after forming national churches; with them the church-body and the body-politic are identical. We are after forming congregations within the body-politic, or nation. The church, according to our idea is a community of saints; a collection of believers who are gath-

ered together for the purpose of spiritual advancement and growth in holiness. According to the idea of the others, it is more an institution where men are to be brought to faith. According to the Lutheran conception the true church is where the Word of God is taught in purity and where the sacraments are properly administered. It is therefore an institution for instruction and for the mediation of salvation. And still more do the teachings and practices of the Catholic church give it the stamp of an institution. Let us now try to show how this difference in the conception of the Church of God leads us to differ from other denominations in the doctrine of baptism, church discipline, the swearing of oaths, and non-resistance.

If a person starts out with the

presupposition that the state must serve the church, he will be inclined to admit, that the church must also serve the state. A service justly asks for a return service. If the church asks for protection by means of the sword, if it wants the use of weapons for the furtherance of its interests, then it must also JUSTIFY such use; in other words, must justify WARFARE.—Further, if a church allows the state a voice in matters of faith, conscience is apt to waver between the authority of the Word of God and the authority of the state. If, then, the state finds it in its interest to ask the swearing of an oath, it is possible that a person might comply with this request without any compunction of conscience.

Another evidence of the union of church and world we noticed

in the idea of national churches. While the German as well as the English reformers, in order to find the proper relation between church and state, did not go back far enough, that is, not to the apostolic church, but stopped at Constantine, they, in trying to find the proper relation between the political and the church community, went back too far and got their views on this point from the Old Testament. With Israel the political community and the ecclesiastical communities were identical. Whoever belonged to the Israelitic people also belonged to the Israelitic church. Carry this view into the New Testament church, and you will have not only the CONVERTED people of a nation belonging to the church but also all the unconverted, including infants. Now, if a person be-

longs to God's people, then he is also entitled to the seal of the covenant;—in the Old Testament dispensation, circumcision, in the New Testament dispensation, baptism. Thus the reformers justified infant baptism principally by reference to the circumcision of the Old Testament.

But if we take the view of the New Testament, that we become a member of God's kingdom not through natural birth, but through regeneration, John 3: 3, and that the unconverted have no rightful place in the church of the Lord, we will not baptize any one with whom regeneration can not have taken place; namely not little children, nor such persons who can not possibly be converted.

Of similar significance is our conception of the Church of God for the practice of church discip-

line. A church that does not consider it her duty to shut out the world, when receiving new members, concedes to the world thus received a right to exist within herself. When, and where might she begin to remove it out of her midst again? It is easily seen, that such churches are occupying a very disadvantageous position, if they undertake to practice church discipline, and it is therefore easily explained, why they here and there have dropped church discipline altogether.—And if we were permitted to step a little outside of our subject, and besides speaking of our confession of faith, take into consideration also our denominational life and practices, it would be easy to show how many of our peculiarities grow out of this fundamental church principle. Only a few



will be mentioned here. If the congregation stands separated from the world, it is (the subordination to the Word of God excepted,) free, and its own highest authority; it has no need of a consistory appointed by the government, nor will it tolerate a ministry independent of the congregation. Further, if the church is regarded as a communion of saints, more stress will be laid upon piety of life than upon orthodoxy of belief. Therefore the indifference of our church toward higher education, especially when it is to be regarded as an essential equipment of the ministerial office. In connection with this be it mentioned, that our church has had very few quarrels over doctrine, but more contentions over questions pertaining to christian life. The original idea of a pure church,

with which our denomination made its entry into the world, has always made itself felt, when congregations became worldly, and led either to a rejuvenating of those congregations, or, as has been more frequently the case, to separations and new formations. The fact, too, that our Mennonite conscience is more sensitive than that of most other denominations, in the matter of secret societies, is in a large measure due to our church principle.

It would not be difficult either to show how many of our weaknesses stand in close connection with our idea of the church; not that they are a legitimate outgrowth of it but rather a one sided development; as take for example, the importance attached to outward conformity to rules and practices, and the absence

of an aggressive spirit in church life.

We have seen of what far-reaching significance our idea of the Church of God is for us. From this root-idea it is, that our church must be comprehended; and only by working upon this idea can true and consistent Mennonitism be developed.

But by mentioning the distinguishing points of our confession of faith, and its prominent characteristic, we have not answered our question; for we have above all to show to what extent these distinguishing doctrines are an advantage and wherein this advantage lies.

We find ourselves with all those doctrines in the advantage that they are scriptural. This would of itself be a sufficient reason, yea, a holy obligation for

us to hold fast to them. The consciousness of "thus saith the Lord," gives his church power and fills her with the hope that her work will finally come out victorious. And when, in addition to this, it can be shown that some special spiritual blessings are connected with these tenets, then our confession of faith becomes evidently so much more valuable to us.

Let us first look upon our doctrine of the Church of God. It is scriptural; for the Lord Jesus said: "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews." John 18: 36. The Apostles did not receive all kinds of people into the church, but only such as confessed to believe in our Lord Jesus Christ. Since our

conception of the Church of God is scriptural, it follows as another advantage, that the conclusions which may be drawn from this conception will also be scriptural. We can completely follow out our fundamental idea of separation of church and world without getting into conflict with any of the teachings of Christ or the Apostles, which can not be said of the contrary notion. Of course, our idea has this disadvantage, that it is not so easily carried out, as the opposite one. A doctrine that so decidedly pronounces its opposition to the world, does not find recognition in the world as easily as a doctrine that does this in a less degree. Was this perhaps the reason why the reformers did not adopt the New Testament idea of the Church of God?

That the reformers made a

mistake in joining church and state is acknowledged even by many of their followers; and the endeavor of the Protestant churches at present is to liberate themselves from the guardianship of the state; and where, as is the case on this continent, new states are formed and their authorities determined, the old mistake is not repeated.—A church independent of state authority, can, without interference, develop according to its innate idea. Such a church is not so apt to get into a position where it has to do violence to conscience, to persecute those of different belief, and to stain its hands with the blood of saints, as has been the case with all state churches.

That we are on scriptural ground with our administering baptism to adults is shown from Christ's last commission to his

disciples: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creatures. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned." Mark 16: 15, 16. Our administration of baptism is further founded on the example of the Apostles who first preached; and when preaching had effected faith, then baptized. Acts 2: 41; 8: 36-38.

A further advantage of adult baptism is this, that by its administration man's freedom of choice, the right to determine his own course, is respected. Not others are called to answer for him, as is the case in infant baptism; but the applicant himself declares whether he shall be a Christian or not. Not others select a church denomination for him; but he does the selecting himself.

Baptism on faith has further this advantage, that it marks a dividing line between the church and the world. It is true, that even in this way the world is not altogether kept out of the church; as the impenitent sometimes feign belief and are received into the church by baptism. But the church on her side has not compromised with the world; nor has she sacrificed any part of her principles. Nay, she must even yet be looked upon as pure; for that the world got into her midst is not her fault, but the fault of him who deceived her. Her position toward the world remains unaltered and unweakened. The world has, of course, crept into her midst, but, it can not make any claim to be tolerated there. Baptism on a confession of faith has lastly this advantage, that it



furnishes the prerequisite condition for a successful practice of church discipline.

That our doctrine of church discipline is no human invention is proven by the instructions of the Lord in regard to the treatment of a brother who sinneth against us; Matt. 18; 15, and also by expressions of the Apostles like these: "Put away from among you that wicked person." 1 Cor. 5: 13. "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness." Eph. 5: 11. "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." 2 Cor. 6: 14. "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" Purge out therefore the old leaven that ye may be a new lump." 1 Cor. 5: 6, 7.

Church discipline is for the individual a constant reminder to be watchful; and when the in-

dividual lacks in watchfulness, the watchfulness of the church steps in, guarding and preserving. It frees the church from dead elements which only hinder her growth and development. It preserves the good reputation of the church with the world and makes her testimony against it more effective. No church that wishes to fulfill its function can do without it.

We have also good scriptural ground for refusing to swear an oath. Our Savior says: "But I say unto you: Swear not at all! Let your communication be yea, yea; nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these, cometh of evil." Matt. 5: 34-37. And, if any one should be in doubt whether the Lord Jesus by this forbade all kinds of oaths, even the oath in the name of God, James tells us not to swear by

heaven, nor by the earth, nor by ANY OTHER OATH. By refusing to give assurance to his word by swearing, the Christian secures respect, for his veracity. Where an oath is asked, it is taken for granted, that what is said without an oath is not always true; and if we are willing to swear, we endorse this idea; and the respect for personal truthfulness is weakened thereby.

More difficult may it seem to show what advantages may result to a church from adhering to the doctrine of non-resistance. With no other principle in our confession of faith do we so much get into conflict with public life; for no truth of our confession has our church been so much persecuted as for her belief in non-resistance. But even if we should not be able to see gain growing out of this princi-

ple, we could not give it up, because it is a command of our Savior, who says: "Resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." By deeper reflection we will however discover that non-resistance brings us rich gains, indeed, for our spiritual life. It emphasizes the truth, that he, who would bear Christ's name, must become like Him also in suffering wrong. It is a real test of the seriousness of our christianity. It reminds us to put our trust in God. It prevents us from over-estimating the possession of worldly goods, or even the enjoyment of our physical life.

We have now endeavored to show what the advantages of our confession are, and may consider the first part of our question answered. But by no means must

the doctrines referred to be regarded as the most important part of our confession of faith; for of most vital importance we consider the doctrine of the SALVATION OF MAN THROUGH THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST, in which doctrine, as well as in most others, we find ourselves in agreement with all christian denominations. Not he, must consider himself a true Mennonite who merely adheres to baptism on a confession of faith, non-resistance etc., but he who, above all, believes in Jesus Christ, as a consequence and subordinates himself in all things to the Word of God.

It now remains to be shown what this confession of faith may be destined to accomplish in our time. This confession shall above all remain the living soul of its bearer, the Mennonite

church. By rooting herself in it, our church shall maintain her individuality and learn to perceive clearly her mission in this world. It is to be the determining principle, by which new ideas are accepted or rejected. It is not merely to be understood, and taught, but above all to be lived up to and followed.

Sad to say, to many of our members and perhaps even to many of our congregations, this confession, that has come to us from our fathers, is only a dead letter; an outward thing, which has never become a matter of personal conviction with them and whose principles they therefore do not know how to apply. Therefore it is necessary, that in every generation our congregations take to heart the words of the poet:

“What from thy father thou inheritedst,

Acquire it, that thou mayest possess it."

Because our confession of faith is founded solely on the true and eternal Word of God, it is destined finally to find general recognition; for God's will and purpose must prevail in the end.

This will hardly come about by all Christians joining our church. Our church will likely remain small, at any rate as long as it does not show more courage in coming with its confession before the world. But the truths of our confession will through the ministry of the Spirit of God, gradually secure recognition in other churches, as has partially already been done.

When our church was formed it was, as has been remarked, the only church which held to the principle of congregational independence. Probably through the influence of the Dutch Bap-

tists (Mennonities) the English Congregationalists, in the beginning of the 17th century, and soon afterward the English Baptists, founded independent congregations. These two large church bodies have till to-day, like ourselves, no controlling authority over the individual congregation.

The correctness of baptism on a confession of faith, is more and more recognized. Not only does the entire large Baptist church reject infant baptism, but also in the younger Protestant churches, like the Methodist and Congregational, there are many members, who give adult baptism their preference.

The doctrine of non-resistance, although taken into their system of faith only by the Quakers, finds more and more recognition; and the number of minis-



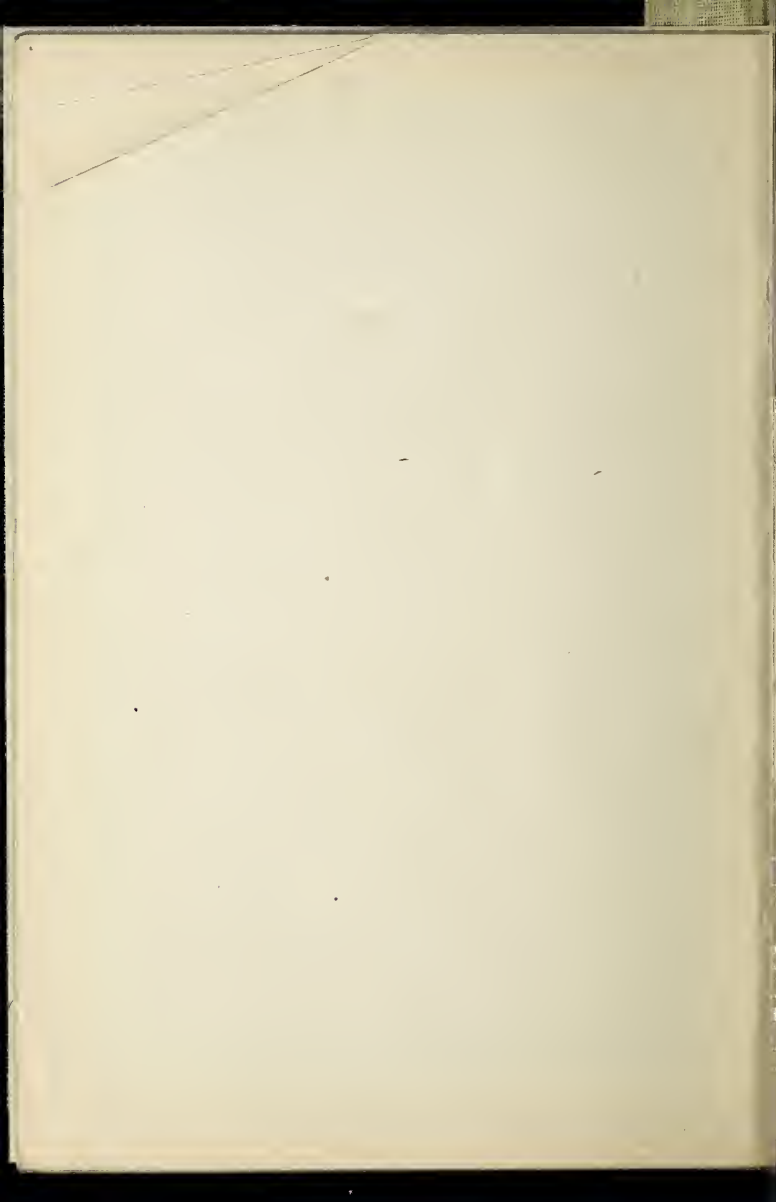
ters who declare war as being antagonistic to the Spirit of Christ is continually increasing. So one after the other of our principles finds its way into Christianity at large, that a learned historian has to confess: "The Ana-baptists have with many of their views committed this only wrong, that they came about three hundred years too soon."

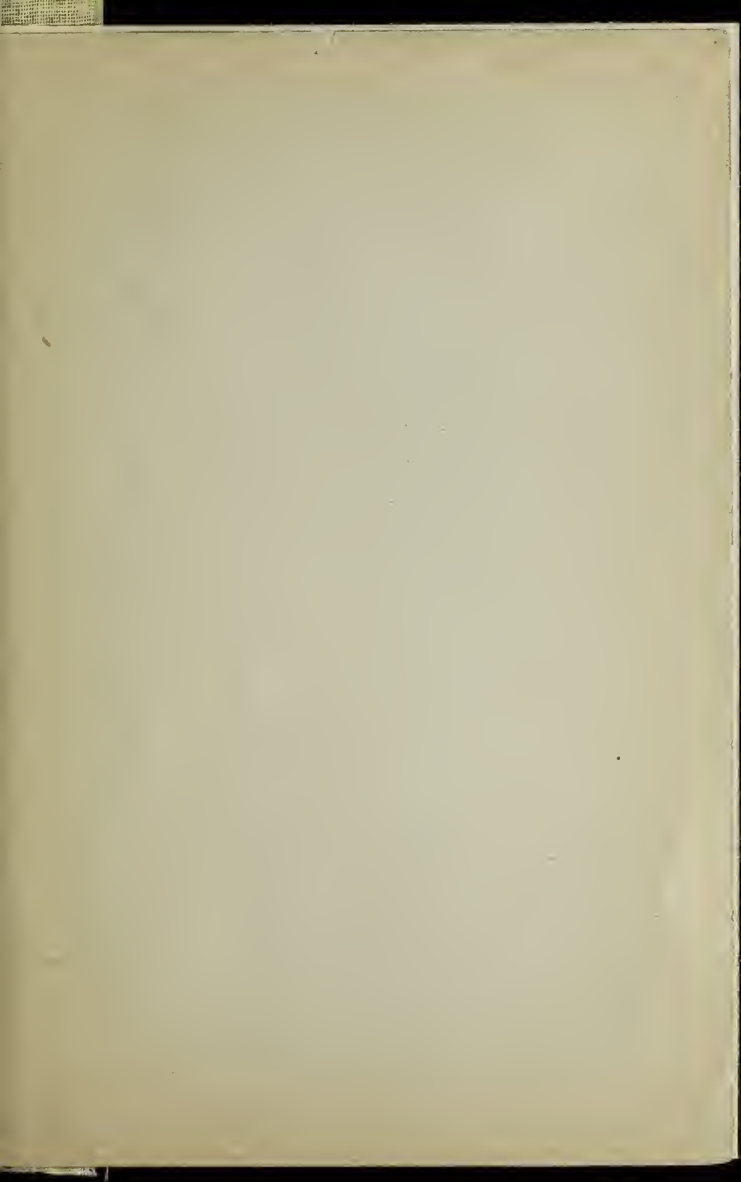
Such observations ought to make our confession of faith so much dearer to us; and ought to fill us with courage to speak it out openly, and stand by it firmly. It is the eternal irrevocable truth; it has been tried and proved in many attacks. Whoever stands on it, stands on solid ground; and whoever works for it, works for a winning cause. Too often have our congregations yielded, at one time to the

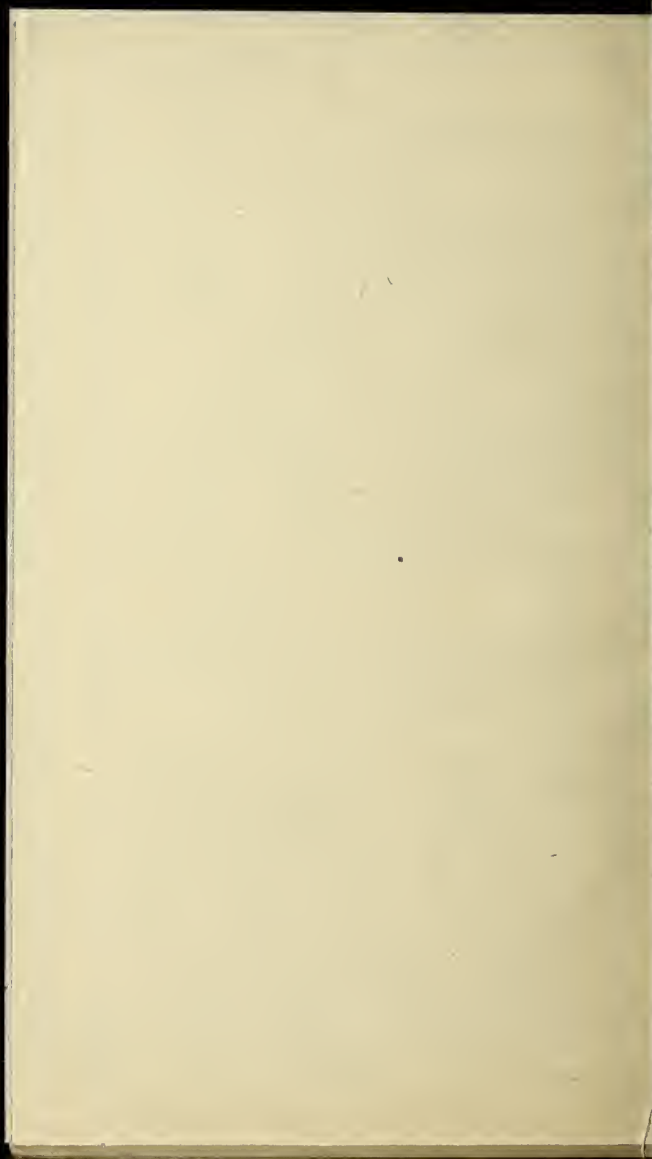
seduction, at another to the threatenings of the world; and too often have they become conformed to the world and abandoned important parts of our confession, thereby robbing themselves of the reward promised to the faithful, as well as of the joy at the final victory of the cause. Be it henceforth otherwise. Let us realize more and more, what our confession means to us, and what a glorious destiny it has. It has not yet completed its mission. Delightful and encouraging as the observations of its ever increasing recognition may be, there are large regions yet to be conquered. The spirit of the world yet controls vast regions; and the Lord of war still swings his firebrand of hatred over the nations. Therefore, ye Mennonite people, gather around your confession,

and carry your banner of truth  
out of your narrow borders into  
the world of unbelief and into  
the world of half-belief, that you  
may have your share in the final  
victory of truth!









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